



A typical view of the commercial strips, Detroit.

## Detroit: An American Sarajevo

Detroit, once a triumph of the industrial age is now an American Sarajevo. Besieged by physical blight and "white fights," it's the tale of urban warfare and ethnic cleansing. Its economic, political and racial isolation, together with other American cities, has manifested into a Yalta conference alike cartography, drawing a geo-political distinctions within the nation, perhaps an internal version of the cold war's containment policy. Even current movement to overhaul the welfare system can be related to the war against communism. The critics pointed out that the demise of U.S.S.R. has relieved this country to socially outdo the enemy. Already in 1974, then Secretary of Education William Bennett said, in a Detroit high school, "We ain't gonna give you th---, ain't giving you no federal money. It's your job to solve this problem on your own." [1] A statement on the geography of responsibility, he affirms that the abandonment of the welfare system has been preceded the abandonment of the urban system. Along the same line, Coleman Young, the mayor of Detroit from 1974-93, said "abandonment [of the city] was planned and encouraged by federal policy." Is the creation of defensive and ghettoized enclaves within the inner cities a national policy on race containment? [2]

Sure there must be thousands of reasons why a million people left Detroit since 1958. But forgotten is how the nuclear bomb turned the collective will of urbanity into a collective fear, changing the centrality and density of cities into organized suicides. The National Defense Highway System, and its goal of strategic target dispersal, was one of the major forces that "spawed the suburban environment and concomitant social fabric characteristic of America today." [3] The decentralization of civilization, encouraged by Mortgage Subsidies, Acts and the Housing Act of 1949, in effect moved this culture's belief in progress from urban to suburban. No one expected that the highways that first rumbled through the Motor City would later needle it and drain its population.

And the paths of urban renewal projects, or "urban removals," in fragmenting the city, form giant earthworks that may serve to protect the suburban values and properties by enclosing city crisis. One has to remember that the expressways that cut through the urban and land mass were first developed not only as the escape and access routes in the event of nuclear attack, but also to create the fire breaks to protect sections of the

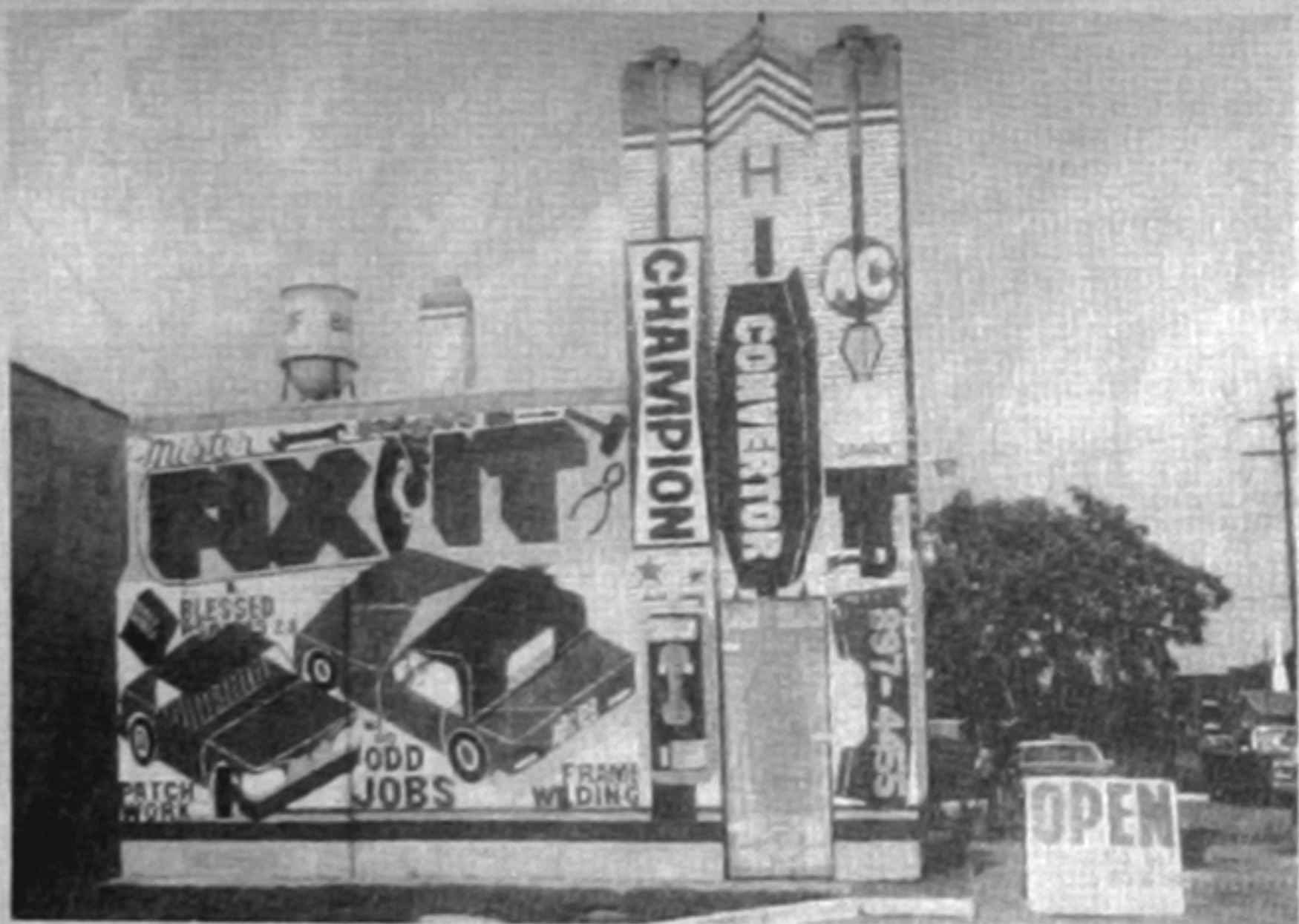
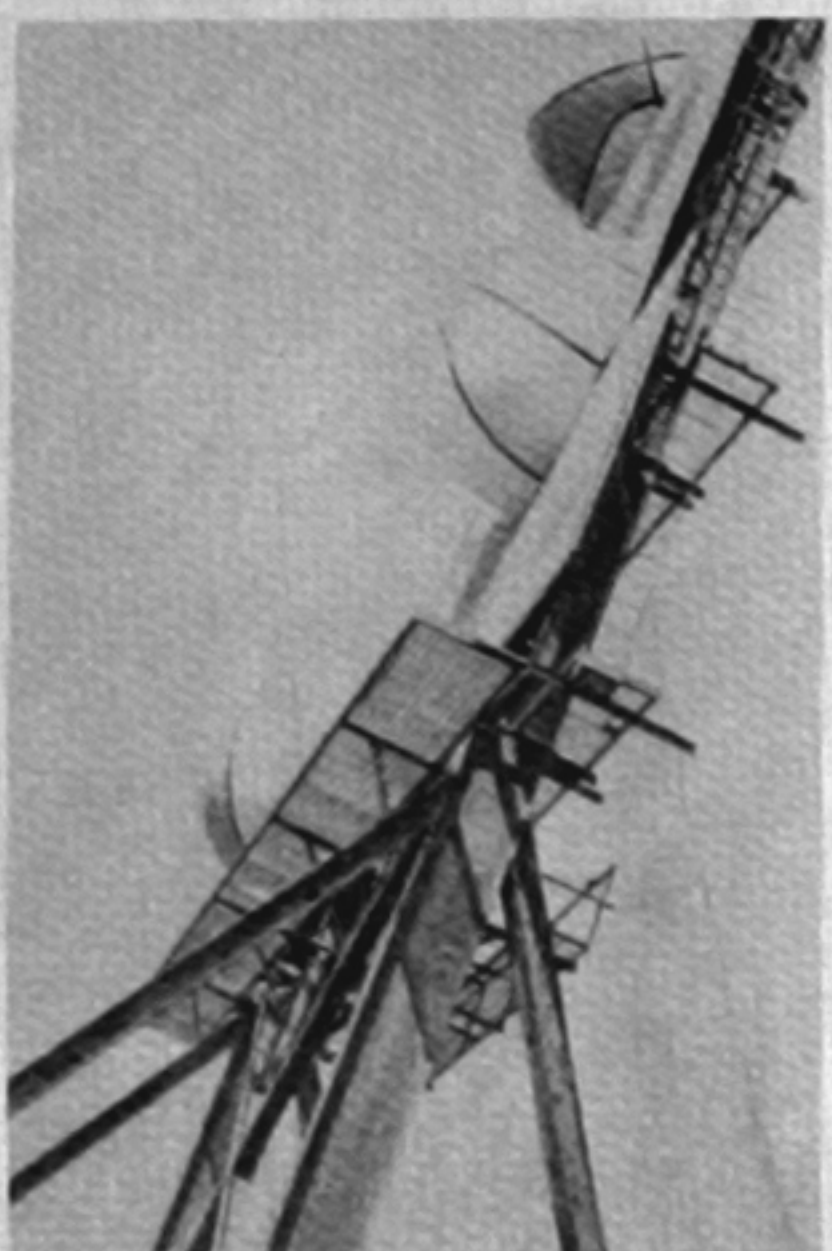
country. [4] Most of all, "urban removals" have left ring like patterns of destruction, literally recounting the nuclear destruction of cities that would have radiated from ground zero. The metaphors between urban implosion and nuclear explosion continues at the abandoned Hudson Department store, people commonly calling it as "the ground zero of Detroit."

The annihilation continues on historic 12th Street, now Rosa Parks Boulevard, was the site of a 1967 riot. Before it was "one of the most densely populated blocks in the United States." [5] But today it appears more pastoral than urban. So inviolable the place has become, this has to be more than simple case of neglect, perhaps a powerful plan to erase all signs of cultural resistance. Unlike the spectacular explosion of the federal building in Oklahoma City, which seems to have given an instant cause in the defense of "heartland," the implosion of our inner cities, the heart of our collective homes, continues without any notice. Even the conflicts on distant lands brings out our philanthropic emotions, and sometimes merit to erect monuments at home.

While witnessing our neglect toward the destruction of the inner cities, we should ask what precisely are our national boundary exactly. Somewhere through our cities runs the boundary of nationalism, anti-urban if not racial, and "The real tragedy is not that the riot changed the course of history in Detroit, but that it did not." [6]

Loosing its place as a collective ground of human and technological progress, Detroit is fast becoming a burial ground of its earlier and more glorious memories. "The sights of people and street dogs traversing vacant land along the main commercial streets, recall views of despoiled and flocks moving among ruins in eighteenth century Rome." [7] With the vast open space between buildings that seems endless, the sense of feeling alone is like in no other cities. With dreams of nature overwhelming its urban reality, Roosevelt Larkin, who has turned one of the vacant lots into vegetable garden, said, "I like

Billboard, Detroit



"Eugene" painted this car repair shop, a former High Speed gas station, and suggested to the owner that he rename it "Mister Fix It." Among pictures of cars, automotive parts, and tools, Eugene included a Bible and a reference to Psalm 23, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of the death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." Detroit, 1994. Camilo Jose Vergara

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View east along Korchival Avenue, one of the city's commercial streets has taken on a rural look. Detroit, 1991. Camilo Jose Vergara

lots of room. If I holler hello, no one says anything to me." [8] At night, under a full moon and above fresh snow, the abandoned skyscrapers, without lights but some 40 stories high, are more powerful than before. Here, the past, will shadow and follow our future.

The disinvestment of city, since the second world war, has led to an apartheid of economics and race. The separation in geography of growth and destruction could nowhere be more monumental than here in Detroit and its affluent suburbs. There appears little in the actual or theoretical that constitutes the remedial and negotiable zone between city with 85% of its population being black and the suburbs 88% white (both a 1980 figure). Better than an hour's drive from downtown to Bloomfield Hills, on the Woodward Avenue—the central artery named for the judge who created the city's radial plan—is a seismic run on the economic fault lines that dissect most American cities. It is a linear narrative on economic distinctions and physical defense, a prenuptial agreement in the unaccompanied marriage of urban and suburbs. Abandoned and left alone, defenses in the age of post-industrial and multinational capitalism, the "Motor City" is now a "Mortal City," an architectural effigy of the traditional city.

Yet so advanced in its deconstruction, Detroit may be the city of tomorrow again. It is a pivotal site where the future urban shapes may be borne, here in the twilight zone of urbanism where the suburbs becomes city, and city the suburbs.



The Heavenly Missionary Baptist Church in Detroit runs a flea market and barbecue stand along Harare Avenue. Norma Sutton, a church official, accounted for their success by saying: "We don't charge people an arm or a leg. We don't sell junk." 1991. Camilo Jose Vergara

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CAMILO JOSE VERGARA

A photo-journalist and the author of upcoming book "The New American Ghetto."

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The splendid Michigan Railroad Station, Warren and Wetmore Architects, 1912. The main entrance leads to a vaulted waiting room filled with light streaming through enormous windows. If you are down-and-out or mentally ill, this is a place to tickets to nowhere, to draw angles or write graffiti, to pace, to stay out of the rain and wind. More than any other derelict space I've seen, this fine Neo-Classical structure says, "We were once a great city." Detroit, 1994. Camilo Jose Vergara.

# DETROIT IS EVERYWHERE

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The question of "Why Detroit?" is a crucial one in that it is far too easy for us to see the situation of Detroit as aberration with no general relevance. But Detroit is everywhere. It presents a reflection of the condition of our urbanism and culture at large. There is something of Detroit

in every United States city. To look at Detroit is to look at all of our cities, but with the symptoms of our condition enhanced. We must all visit Detroit. It can reveal ourselves to each other.

Long-time General Motors President Charles Erwin Wilson said it first in 1952 with his famous admission that: "For years I thought what was good for our country was good for General Motors, and vice versa. The difference did not exist." Not much has changed. Within the corporate scheme of things Detroit has simply been one more commodity, this within the commodification of our national culture which has played itself out over the past half-century. The companies and products which created Detroit

have also destroyed it. Detroit is no longer useful to its makers. Its capital has become globalized, its factories abandoned for cheap labor and fewer controls elsewhere. The industrial remains can be seen only as a form of corporate penance. There is seemingly no obligation to recognize the place as history and people. One of the Nation's largest cities is one more thing to throw into the dustbin.

Covertly the automobiles alone would have destroyed the city which built them. But General Motors helped overtly. In 1955 it destroyed the trolleys after workers could afford cars. Today you can still find Detroit's trolleys running in Mexico City. It is amazing that there is not more anger. But

then General Motors followed the same strategy in scores of American cities.

Actually Detroit represents an unspoken ideal in our society. For many people it might just as well stay just as it is. The statistics tell all. It is an American apartheid, whites safely in the suburbs and poor minorities in the city as economic captives, and inhabitants of a legacy which they can not maintain or defend. In every other city we can find this condition, but nowhere else is it so brutal. The suburbs have colonized the city, and more. Detroit has become a 'suburb' of its suburbs. Its density is now lower.

Given this configuration, much of what is emerging in Detroit urbanism is without precedent. It is new, an amalgam of proximity and emptiness. Detroit is more LA than LA: endless expressways, suburbs, and houses. It has no Metro, expressways with no exits, suburbs with no city, streets with no houses. There are cross-roads 'towns' at the center and 'border-crossings' at the periphery. There is medievalization: new infrastructures of itinerant paths and regroupings of itinerant houses.

Deconstruction was played out literally in Detroit in the 1980's, while architects elsewhere played in the libraries and galleries. Detroit is more interesting and more vital than what 'theory' can predict. The parking garage in the auditorium of the Michigan Theater is a case-study in real 'trans-programming.' Detroit is a future. We need to learn from it. To paraphrase Charlie Wilson, "As goes Detroit, so goes the country." Or one could put it more bluntly. In spite of the new suburban majority in the United States, our future still lies in the cities.

Richard Plunz

Detroit is Everywhere is a collaborative inquiry by photo-journalist Camilo Jose Vergara, Columbia University's Urban Design Studio and Richard Plunz, Cranbrook Academy of Art's Architecture Studio and Dan Hoffman, and StoreFront for Art & Architecture and Kyong Park. The exhibition contains urban studies and proposals for the city of Detroit.

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## Detroit Waits For the Millennium

The city is quiet, the air clean, large open fields and desolate factories everywhere. The Detroit River is calm and calm, its surface broken only by a few boats and a few small boats. "It's not the water, it's not the river, it's not the gold, but we have the water," says Michael Goodin of Green's Detroit Business. "There is no other city in the area that has an international waterfront, a fresh water supply like this."

Detroit is a city where economic power disappeared quickly, leaving a desolate, fragmented and nearly bankrupt. During the decade beginning in 1983, the year after "the riot," the city lost 200,000 jobs, one-third of its total employment. By 1990 about a million people lived in the city, about half the 1950 population, and of those nearly one quarter were on welfare. At the same time, well over 10% of the city's 140 square miles of land was vacant.

Once the largest factory town in the world, a mixed ethnic blue-collar city, Detroit is now an African-American metropolis that can no longer sustain itself. More than three-quarters of the residents are black, with roots in the Southern states, particularly Alabama, Georgia, the Carolinas and Mississippi. Compared with other large American municipalities, its population is homogeneous and dwindling.

"People are running, there is nothing to do here, there is no jobs here. People have to go money somewhere," says A. A. retired carpenter. Residents have been leaving Detroit at the rate of about 20,000 a year since 1950. Those who remain insistently warned me against "dumping on us and our city," and against looking at Detroit in isolation. "You can't write about Detroit as if it is in its own little niche, its own little corner, just because it's black," Goodin emphasized.

Detroit confronts the visitor and resident alike with ubiquitous decay. The downtown contains the most awesome concentration of crumbling ruins in the nation, prematurely aging skyscrapers straggled by their owners and abandoned to nature. Seen from the north, beyond the wide gap of the Fisher Freeway a cluster of mostly empty Art Deco office buildings rises hundreds of feet above cleared lots. In its shadow, low buildings draw the homeless, alcoholics, drug addicts, and others to institutions set up to help them. Large numbers of people congregate in only a few places near the Detroit River, on a narrow strip about two blocks wide, and in Greenwood, an enclave of ethnic restaurants and shops.

The numerous churches that stand alone in open fields, their neighborhoods gone, are still imposing and attractive. Green historical markers commemorate the past in official prose on buildings that are themselves ghosts. Vehicles speed past the vanishing neighborhoods of single-family houses. Detroit's famous freeway-five of them, more than in any city of similar population - seem to be waiting for the city to wake up and form traffic jams once more. Unlike New York City, where the poorest parts of town have been marked by ever-greater concentrations of destitute people and facilities Detroit is becoming increasingly barren.

After World War II, the construction of those five highways, ramming through hundreds of blocks of houses, sometimes at stretches of nearly ten miles, destroyed more than 20,000 homes, contributing to the decline of the city by providing easy access to the suburbs. Already two decades ago, according to the city assessor, Detroit had over 5,000 vacant commercial buildings, "which if lined up, would occupy 60 of the city's 175 miles of business thoroughfares." The degree of dereliction is unprecedented. Three years ago, a block by block survey by *The Five Pines* found more than 15,000 derelict buildings. Added to explain, mayor Coleman Young replied that no city in the Western world had endured so much white and middle-class flight: "One million folks have abandoned this city in less than forty years."

Abandonment in a city that had such a strong belief in progress and growth has meaning that everybody understands. According to *The Five Pines*, "The vacant buildings are the most visible evidence of the city's social and economic problems. The ugly confines of an abandoned house give shape and substance to every nebulous complaint about Detroit."

Ruins are typically regarded as depressing, showing both the seriousness of the community's problems and the fact that something better once existed. City residents tend to see them as symbols of



The famous Hudson's Department Store, one of the largest in the world, has been empty for over a decade. Scavengers have ransacked the interior downtown Detroit, 1992. Camilo Jose Vergara

white abandonment, while their suburban neighbors regard them as proof of the present leadership's inability to manage cities. For others, ruins symbolize cities hopelessly bypassed by the world economy.

The value of our devastated landscape is thus limited to exhibits useful for focusing attention on reasons for decay: on the plight of the residents, and on the need to begin rebuilding. Conversely, they become spectacles, demonstrating the futility of meeting the challenge to rebuild. Why try to save what can be saved?

America leads the world in urban ruin. Yet our very closeness to them prevents us from seeing them clearly, from distancing upon their significance, while a strong taboo - marked by rage, impotence and despair - keeps us from admiring their evocative power. These

The Treasure of the downtown skyline, the exquisitely proportioned David Stett Building was completed in 1929. According to Hugh Ferriss, this red marble and stone edifice was a harbinger of the city of the future. Bankrupt and in a new urban context, it still is. Detroit, 1995. Camilo Jose Vergara



environments are rich in historical and philosophical reminders of the achievements of an earlier generation, the passing of time and the power of nature.

There have been many proposals to restore economic health to the city. The City Planning Department's 1985 Master Plan proposed that Detroit, while retaining industry, should compete with Chicago, New York and the Bay Area in international banking, tourism, robotics, and other high-tech ventures, re-emerging as a cultural, and information center linked with the rest of the world by fiber optics. This image of the city already fits the reality of its thriving and expanding, mostly white suburbs.

With a population of more than three million, these are among the richest in the nation. On a late summer afternoon the winding tree-lined streets of Bloomfield Hills are full of children playing. No fence separates the well-tended lawns or the large, comfortable houses. Only lawnmowers break the sound of play and conversation. Beyond the residential enclaves lie the research and development outfits, corporate headquarters, financial centers, shopping malls, developers' offices and architectural and engineering firms that sustain this pleasant way of life.

Like earlier dreams of renewal, the Master Plan proceeded from a faith that some well-considered investments would set Detroit on a path toward reclaiming its importance in American economic life. In another era large downtown projects were the preferred heralds of "salvation." The most important of these grand designs is the Renaissance Center, a riverfront complex planned twenty years ago to "revitalize the city's image" and draw people from the entire metropolitan region. Boaters still call Detroit "Renaissance City."

The center was designed by Atlanta architect John Portman and sponsored by Henry Ford II with the support of the chief executives of the city's largest corporations. In 1972, Ford described the Renaissance Center, while it was still on the drawing board, as a "catalyst that may change the whole tone and lift the spirits of a city and a downtown area that sorely needs a boost." Portman echoed his patron, saying "That is what architecture should do, it should lift people; it should make them feel good; it should make them want to be around and not leave the area."

Conceived when the 1967 race riots were still fresh in people's memories, the center stands like a fortress high above the streets, separated from the rest of downtown by a broad boulevard East Jefferson. Five large glass towers, the tallest seventy-three stories high, with a hotel, offices, shopping and commercial facilities, were completed in 1977 at a cost of more than \$350 million. Two more towers were added in the early 1980s. A local developer characterized the choice of the center's location and design as a strategy to attract tenants: "They were saying, 'Move on over to us, we are very safe, they can't attack us from the river side, they can't attack us from East Jefferson."

On a visit to the Renaissance Center a dozen years ago, I saw Tiffany's, FAO Schwarz and a shop being readied for Christmas Day. Today, these symbols of wealth and sophistication are not there or are very close to it. The most prominent commercial tenant on the building's ground floor is Burger King. Overall, the complex has a 5 percent vacancy rate. By contrast, the vacancy rate among office buildings just opening downtown is 22 percent. Yet despite this abundance of space, one large commercial building was recently completed and another is nearly finished. Both are elegant post modern structures, similar to those in Battery Park City in New York or the new buildings in Chicago's Loop. Several subsidized middle-income housing developments have also been built along the river.

Winding alongside the Renaissance Center and making a 2.9 mile circle around the downtown area is the People Mover, a Disney

type train connecting thirteen individually designed stations. This federally funded above ground rail system had the potential to contribute to a cohesive downtown. Yet by the time it was completed, in 1987 at a cost of \$210 million, a huge section of the downtown was already obsolete.

"I used it once; it don't go nowhere," said Frank, a maintenance man in a downtown office building. The original plan, vetoed by the state legislature, was to build a regional transportation system connecting Detroit to its suburbs along Woodward Avenue. The people mover was a compromise, allowing the city to spend federal funds already allocated for a small, experimental downtown transit system.

The Renaissance Center, the People Mover, the renovated Rex Theater (an Art Deco landmark in Woodward Avenue where the Supremes, Stevie Wonder, and Marvin Gaye often played), a neighboring theater turned dance hall despite these attractions, the center of the city remains a desolate place. New construction, when sound existing buildings were in dire need of tenants, has resulted in the emptying of older structures more distant from the river, thus accelerating the demise of the north section of the downtown. And the developments have not increased the number of commuters coming to the city each day - still about 100,000.

For two weeks I lived in the city's desolate northwest section, immediately west of Grand Circus Park, once a regular stop for big bands, jazz groups and the nightclub set. Now two of the best-known and largest hotels are empty, and a third was recently demolished. Of five big theaters, only two are operating, and not a single specialty shop remains.

Underfunded service organizations predominate. Landlords undertake frequent raids to lure tenants neighboring buildings. Battles rage for the rent money of the American Civil Liberties Union, Planned Parenthood, Family Services, and employment training programs.

The sinister Book Tower, the tallest building in the area, looks like something out of a science-fiction novel. With almost no tenants, its 350-foot height serves mainly to support communications equipment. A brilliant white dish antenna on its classical temple top seems like a gigantic, wide-open eye surveying the city. A forest of rusting metal poles rises from the roof.

On the streets, wanderers and madmen sit on the sidewalks or push shopping carts. Those buildings that are still open are often cleaned and tended by Serbian women who barely speak English. Late at night the People Mover, reduced to one brightly lit car, loops around completely empty, as if carrying a party of phantoms from station to station.

A quaint red trolley imported from Lisbon links this part of town to the Renaissance Center, its route ending Washington Boulevard, once the most exclusive commercial street in Detroit. In the early eighties city planners decided to transform part of the boulevard into a "people's place," a \$5 million beautification project. Half the street was given over to a raised rectangular mall, with plantings, benches and overhanging iron fountains pouring water into a crystalline stream running over a bed of stones.

The Labon trolley and the Washington mall came too late. This is a downtown mobilized, a stage set hoping for a replay of the 1930's, a place to wait for the millennium amid the homeless, the Serbian women, the pigeons and bats.

Detroit has great gaps. As nature takes over, the landscape begins to resemble a wilderness interrupted by skeletal small groups of houses getting smaller, and the rusting remnants of old industries. "Detroit is reverting to a farm," says Corinne Gilly, former director



The People Movers, Detroit's jewel of a monorail, neatly painted white, green and yellow, loops through the downtown, Detroit, 1995. Camilo Jose Vergara

of the Planning Department and a professor of urban history at Wayne State University in Detroit. City residents, she says are fortunate to have an environment that some people travel far and pay dearly to enjoy. This observation is not well received by Detroiters, who perceive derelict spaces as dirty or dangerous. "Nature" is what grows in places people leave behind: the grass that grows in the concrete cracks along the sidewalk, the hardy weeds that push their way through the polluted floor of a vacant factory, the tall plants that cover rusted metal, mattresses, rugs, bottles and tires in empty lots.

A popular saying in the city goes, "the last one out, turn off the lights." After so much talk of extinction, the city's endurance has become a source of pride. "I am not leaving, I am a Detroiters," says Al. "Why not stay and make it better?" Father Charles Denys, a Belgian priest whose parish, Our Lady of Sorrows, is in the poorest section of the city, adds "We are just holding on. You have a lot of good people left." The adaptations needed to survive, though, are drastic. The Stapleton Center, a senior citizens complex occupying an entire block, is enclosed by a tall iron fence topped with a row of razor ribbon wire. "It is really today," said Father Denys. The complex was built at a better time: the fence came later.

A local teenager conceded that the complex looked like a jail for old people, but explained that these were measures designed "to keep people from going in, robbing them or something." Another teenager commented wistfully, "The churches take care of these old people. They got everything they need in there."

Middle-class blacks who can afford to move to the suburbs so in the tens of thousands. But according to Elizabeth Brown, a community development expert, a "pool of leadership" stays here, people who are the future. For Arthur Johnson, vice president for community relations at Wayne State, there is no place he would rather live. "I was not in it," he says of the robust and thriving Detroit of the 1950s, and notes that white people forget how segregated "thinning Detroit" really was.

"Why do so many black families who can leave decide to stay?" asks Johnson. Comparing the city to a big mansion left for a poor family to keep, he views Detroit as both a prize and a burden: "They cannot leave it, they cannot provide air conditioning, they cannot paint it or keep up the grounds because they don't have the means to do so. As long as they stay, they prevent the fixtures from being

stolen, the pipes from freezing; they are the ones who keep the water running and put out the fires. If they manage to preserve it, it would be for those who stay." But asked when the city is going to turn around, Elizabeth Brown replies, "If I answered that question, I may not like the answer and go somewhere else."

Known as now spread throughout the world. Lacking a replacement for its automobile industry, Detroit must inevitably atrophy. Only two assembly plants are still in the city from a total of about thirty in 1907. General Motors, Packard and Chrysler's Jefferson North plants are automated, operating with less than half the labor force of the plants they replaced. Research and development and data processing have also moved out of the city. A widespread view of it that this former "factory town" will eventually stabilize at a population of about 200,000, slightly more than in such Michigan cities as Grand Rapids and Lansing.

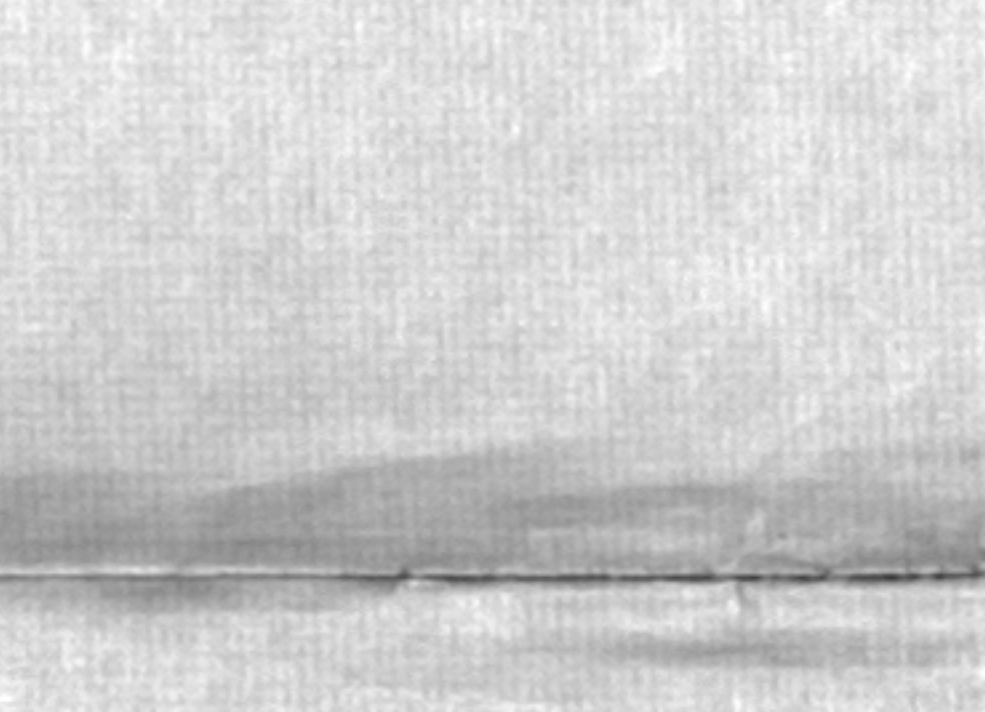
Coleman Young, in power since 1974, is jokingly referred to as "Mayor for life". But an election is coming up in a year and a half, and consensus has it that a change in political leadership will be good for the city, luring many of the developers and executives who haven't found Detroit a good place to do business. (Detroit Archer is the new mayor of Detroit since 1994) Michael Goodin of Green's Detroit expresses unqualified faith in the city, saying, "I don't think Detroit is a dying city. All the stuff of life is here. It is a city in transition. Right now crime seems like it is out of control. Of course, I know it is not, but it seems like it. It seems that there is desolation and unemployment everywhere. I know it is not, but it seems like it. It seems that there is nothing but poverty and decay; it just seems like it. I think Detroit is like a drunk who has to take all the blows before he will reach out and seek help and do what is necessary to get off the bottle and regain the strength."

"Whites living alone or whites who segregate themselves can prosper, and there is nothing in my mind that says that black living segregated cannot prosper among themselves. And if that is going to be the city's destiny, then that is how the city will begin to re-emerge and develop itself."

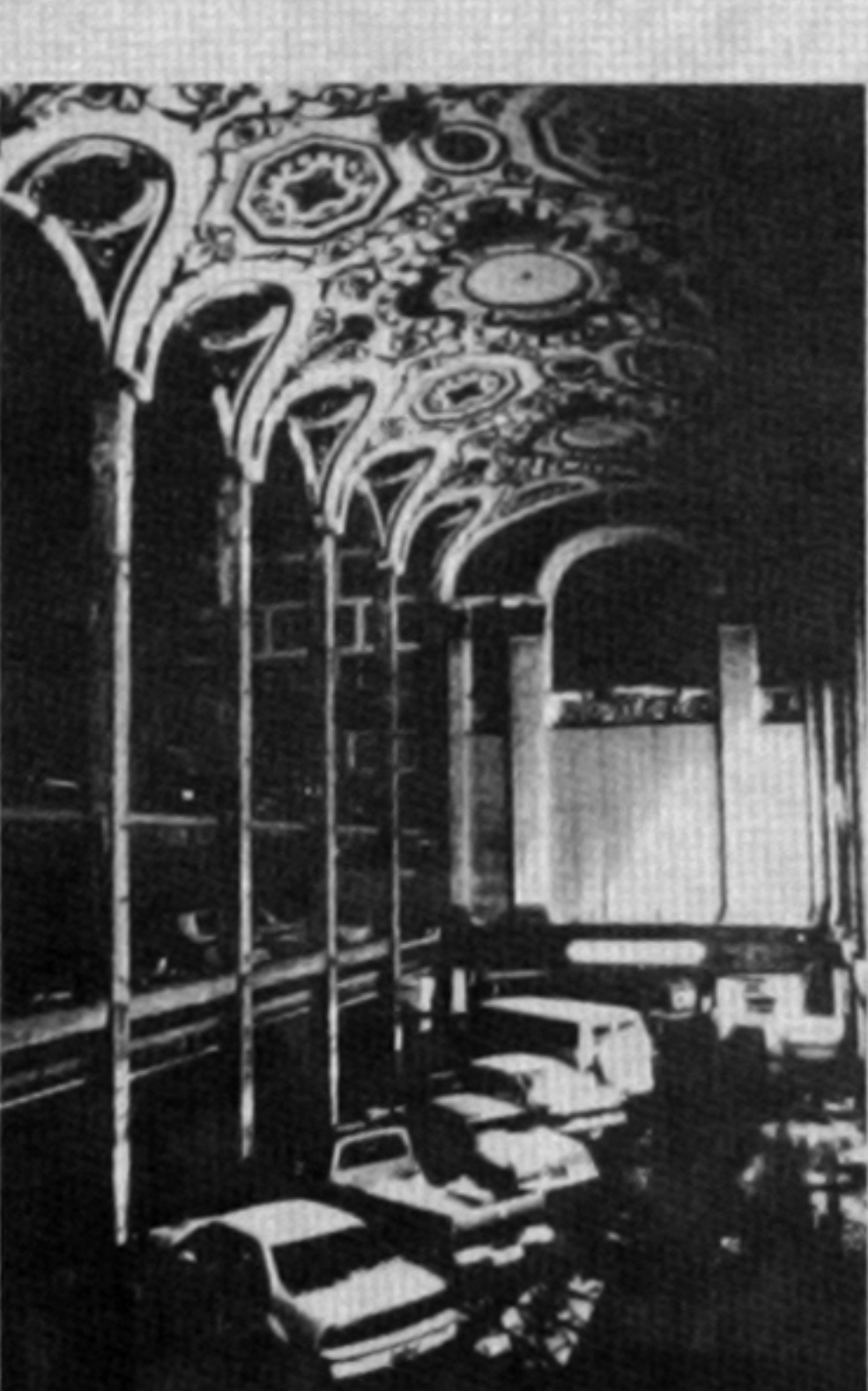
The powerful spell of this magnificent desolate city by the river forces us to go beyond the issues of blame, anger and hopelessness, to ask questions about our national goals. I can think of no better place for meditation. Visits to Washington and New York City, our imperial capitals, should be followed by a visit to Detroit, a place for reflection.

Upon leaving Detroit, tired and bewildered, I saw a large male phantasm fly low in an arc over the freeway, landing on the grounds of a semi-abandoned housing project. The energetic clapping of its wings, the rich brown of its plumage, in long tail passing so close to the dull cement of the highway - an unlikely phoenix.

Camilo Jose Vergara  
(Originally published in *The Nation*, May 10, 1992)



The People Movers, Detroit's jewel of a monorail, neatly painted white, green and yellow, loops through the downtown, Detroit, 1995. Camilo Jose Vergara



Extreme contrast abound in the former Michigan Theater, now a parking garage. In place of plush rugs, one finds wet, grimy pavement, old, flesh-toned marble columns now face three parking floors covered by steel and concrete beams. The garage is covered by a ceiling reminiscent of a rococo palace minus the chandeliers. An Austrian architect commented, 'They would never have done this in Europe. They would have either demolished the building or restored it.' Detroit, 1995. Camilo Jose Vergara

## Commercial Spaces

Woodward Avenue runs in a straight line north from the heart of the city of Detroit into the far reaches of its surrounding suburban areas. The so-called "main vein" of the region, the avenue cuts through city's many cultural and economic layers. It begins at the heart of the old city abandoned commercial core and moves through the "cultural district" with its old museums and new hospitals, past the old Highland Park assembly plant where the model T was made, along the first paved mile in America to the State Fair grounds, past the cemetery and over the overpass at Eight Mile Road with its flanking pair of gigantic billboards. This is the northern boundary of the city and marks the first of the many layers of suburbs that surround it. Up to Eight Mile Road, the avenue has a rather desolate air, the spaces between the institutional buildings lined with a mix of party stores and abandoned structures, emblematic of Detroit's well known decline. Beyond eight mile road the economic picture suddenly changes with a wide variety of stores jostling for space on the avenue, giving it the familiar character of an active, yet slightly over used commercial strip. And so it goes, on up the avenue with the economy rising to its peak at Bloomfield hills, nine miles away and falling away again as it reaches the city of Pontiac.

The range of economies along the avenue is a familiar one for cities of the industrial northeast, revealing the distinct fissures between the economy of production typical of the inner city and the economy of consumption that drives the surrounding suburbs. The former is characterized by structures built around basic manufacturing industries where raw material is processed into products for a mass market while the latter focuses upon marketing itself, where the delivery and advertising of products and related services are the primary activity.

The economy of production required great concentrations of labor and capital and resulted in a dynamic local economy. Architecture played an important role in this period, representing the inherent civic nature of this economy giving its building types an appearance appropriate to the hierarchic structures of domination that were crucial to its success. Even commercial buildings carried a formal air, recalling the virtues of an idealized civic history in their mass produced Doric columns and canopies. It is interesting to note that architecture itself remained the primary form of public address for commercial entities. To have a building on a major street was the most effective form of advertising, declaring a civic presence as well as announcing the presence of a company's products in the local market.

All of this begins to change with the advent of the economy of consumption, the basis of which was established in the post war boom, resulting in the complete transformation of the city's landscape. This new economy grew out of the need to absorb the over production of goods; the direct result of the efficiencies of automated production methods. New forms of marketing were needed to expand consumption at ever increasing rates. Media became an integral part of the economic system, fabricating desire and communicating the latest information in the ever quickening pace of advancing global techno-capital. What is important to us in the urban context is that such an economy no longer requires the concentrations of labor and skills typical of a production based system. Electronic media further permits industries to be spread all over the region and the country, further eroding the previously essential proximity which once characterized industrial cities like Detroit. Seen through the context of a consumer driven economy, the city of Detroit is now just another landscape of consumption encumbered by the desolate residue of a production based infrastructure.

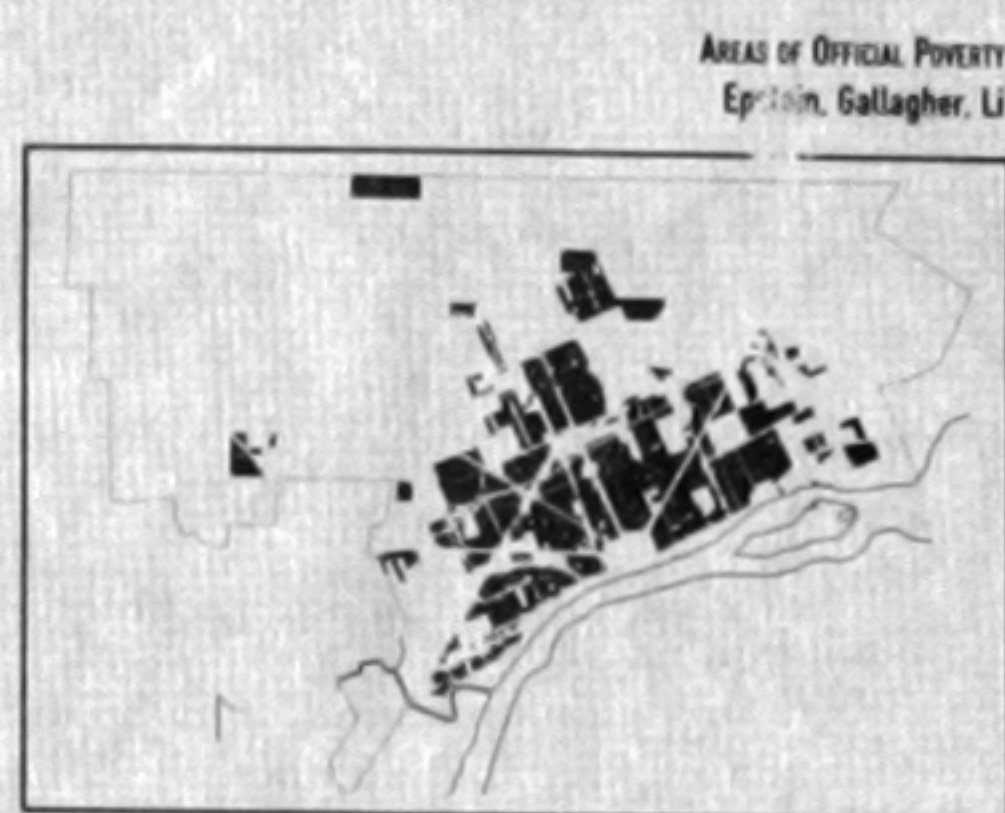
Media now dominates architecture along the thoroughfares of the city, the new plates of public appearance. We are all familiar with its forms: the large billboards, the colorful storefronts, the illuminated signs filling in the empty spaces between the buildings which stand behind them. Any excess in the budgets for commercial buildings are now spent in the elaboration of their applied signage rather than upon enriching their material presence. This occurs in all areas of the region from the economically powerless center city to the wealthy suburbs. Commercial signs are now the medium of signification, revealing the wide range in the economic landscape of the region. At one end are the signs made in the center city area. Here inhabitants cannot afford to purchase a professionally designed product so they do it themselves or pay itinerant artists to paint over their buildings. The brightly colored "party stores" are an excellent example of such a vernacular practice, where pictures of products and their brand adorn every surface. The next category of commercial space is characterized by mass produced signs that are affixed to existing structures. More often than not, these signs are associated with nationally based chains operating in the local area. The connection between the architecture and the sign is thin, as the image and location of the store are subject to frequent changes. The work of the hand returns to the surface of commercial space as the economy ascends; custom designed storefronts are signs of a powerful economy. The deliberate use of architectural materials now returns into the picture. Real bricks can be used instead of their image. Real wood can be also be used though even this is becoming rare.

We can now see how the typology of commercial space has supplanted the typology of civic form. Building types no longer carry a public meaning in a media driven environment. Commercial space is simply too fluid to sustain a singular image.

The Architecture Studio at Cranbrook has begun to take a closer look at the issue of commercial space in Detroit, examining the ways that it shapes our experience of moving through the city. For this work we have accepted the premise that the projections of media now constitute the primary public space of the city and if architecture is to play a role in this space it must provide this with a more dynamic and compelling infrastructure. To this end we have studied a number of existing sites in the city, examining them for ways in which they can be activated by the presence of commercial images. We have also considered ways in which the surface of the image can intersect with the material surface of architecture, assuming that a mediation can be achieved that could give presence to both, drawing architecture up from behind the sign and pulling media down into the presence of material.

All the sites chosen for this project are located along Eight Mile Road, the boundary between the City of Detroit and its northern suburbs, halfway between the powerless landscapes of the center city and the power driven economy on the fringe of the urban region. We decided to focus upon billboards, for as we have indicated, they remain one of the most prevalent forms of commercial space, their gigantic scale projecting singular images into the otherwise emptied context. Another aspect of billboards is that they are designed to be seen from within a moving car, capturing the gaze of the drivers with sensuous forms that strain out of the frame of the picture. Years ago, Robert Venturi hypothesized that architecture itself can become this very object of desire. The "duck" is the billboard in the round, a lateralized image whose very presence replaces the trace of desire with the reality of human which, in its turn allows for the potential details of inhabitation and construction. Billboards are never that funny. Their frames maintain a discreet spatial limit to the image which permit the illusion of perspective, pockets of desire in an otherwise empty world. Illusion is the key, the question is, how can in material and spatial effects be used to deepen the experience of commercial space.

Dan Heftman and Cranbrook Architecture Studio



AREA OF OFFICIAL POVERTY  
Epstein, Gallagher, Li



55 FORD AT CADILLAC SQUARE  
Gomez, Klumppner



Columbia University: Urban Design Studio  
FACILITY: Richard Plunz, Moji Baralato, Michael Conrad  
IN COLLABORATION WITH: Kyong Park, Camilo Jose Vergara

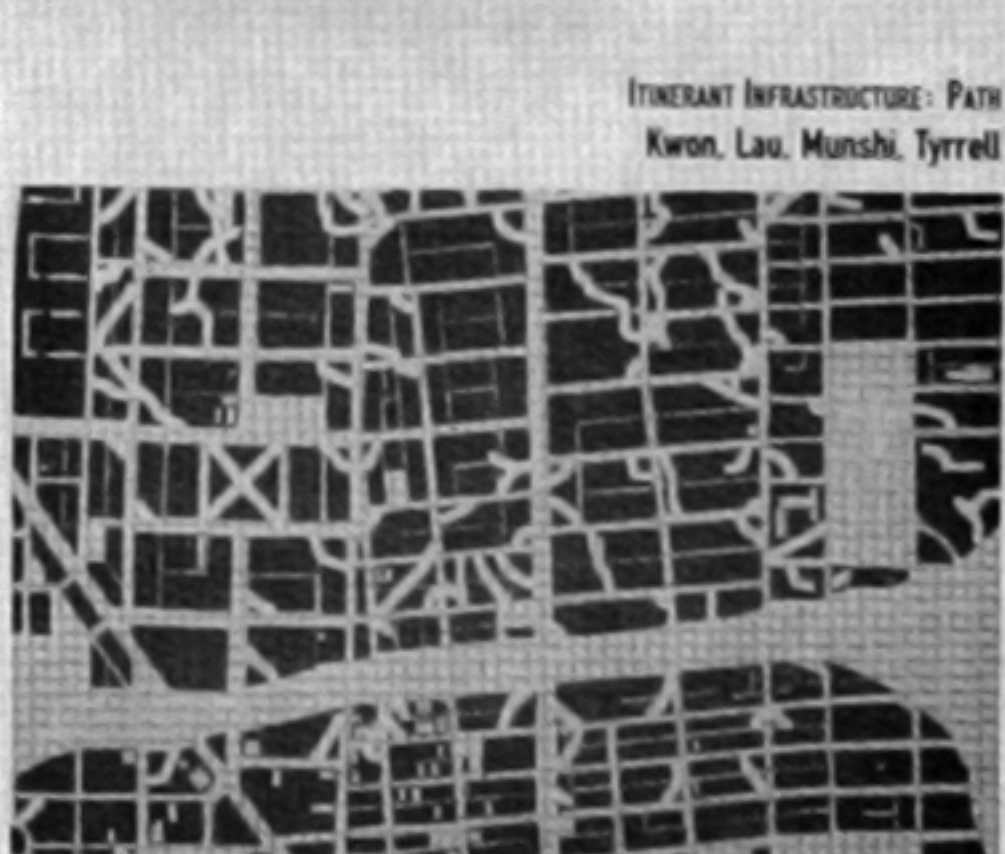
DRP/STONKING DETROIT  
Maria Llerena de Gomez, Hubert Klumppner

REPRESENTING DETROIT  
Mark Brune, Eric Prodi

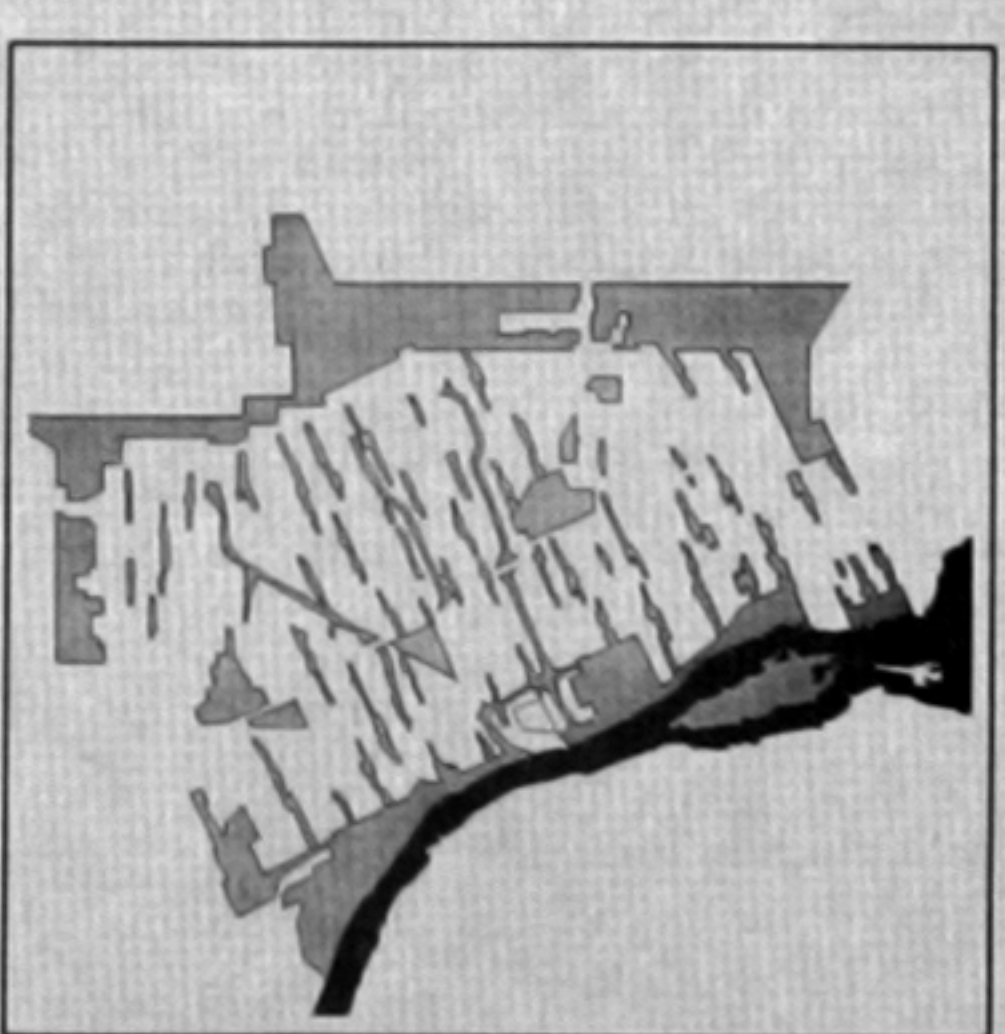
DETROIT: SMALL PARTS  
Erik Hansen, Kai Lee, Sheryl Morris, Kevin Tyrrell

DETROIT: RE-TEXT  
Frank Lim, Philip Lutz, Frank Wang

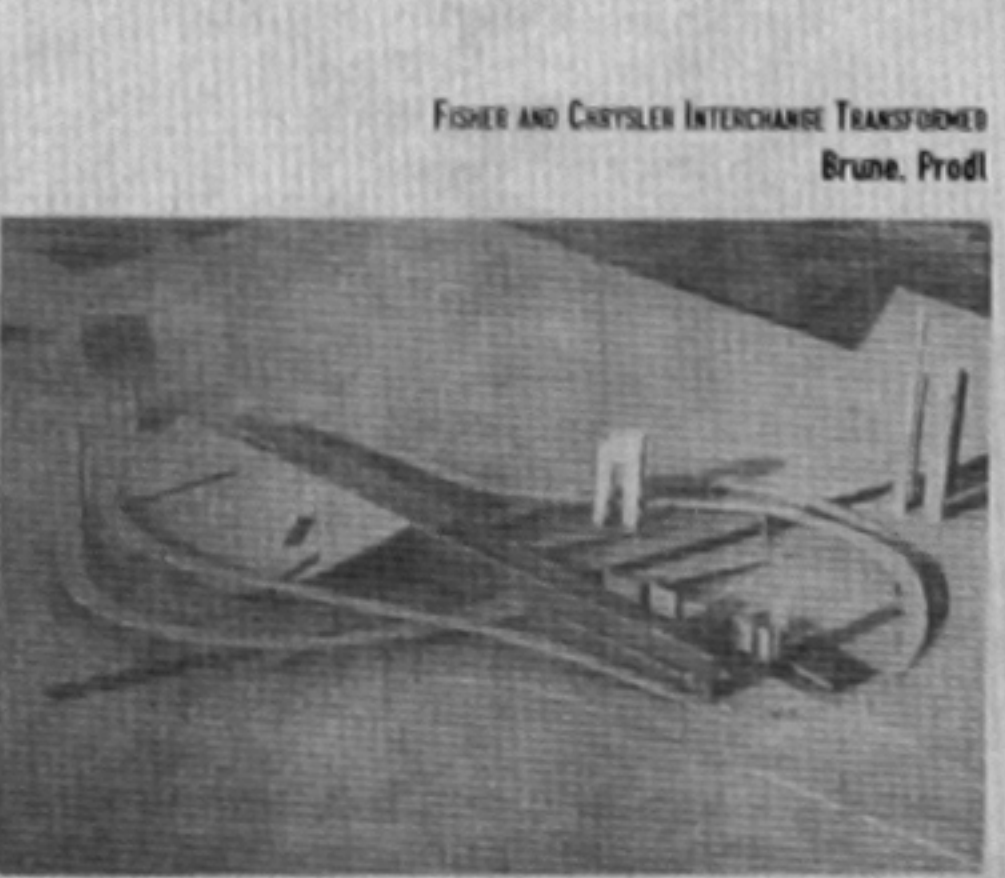
DETROIT: CONSOLIDATION  
Eric Epstein, Patrick Gallagher, Lin Li



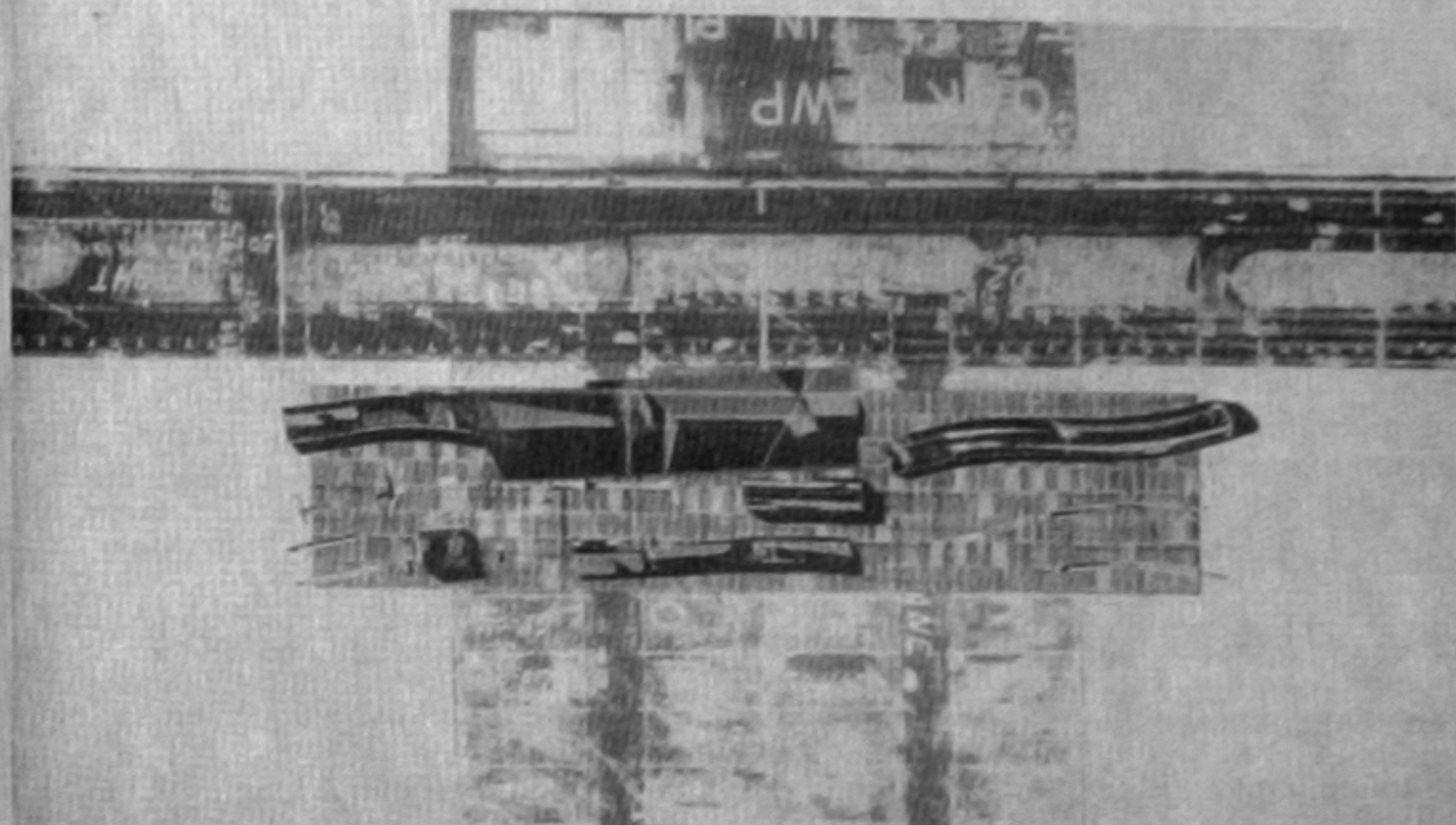
INTERCITY INFRASTRUCTURE: PATH  
Kwon, Liu, Morris, Tyrrell



COMMONITY FIELDS/GREEN FIELDS  
Lim, Lutz, Wang



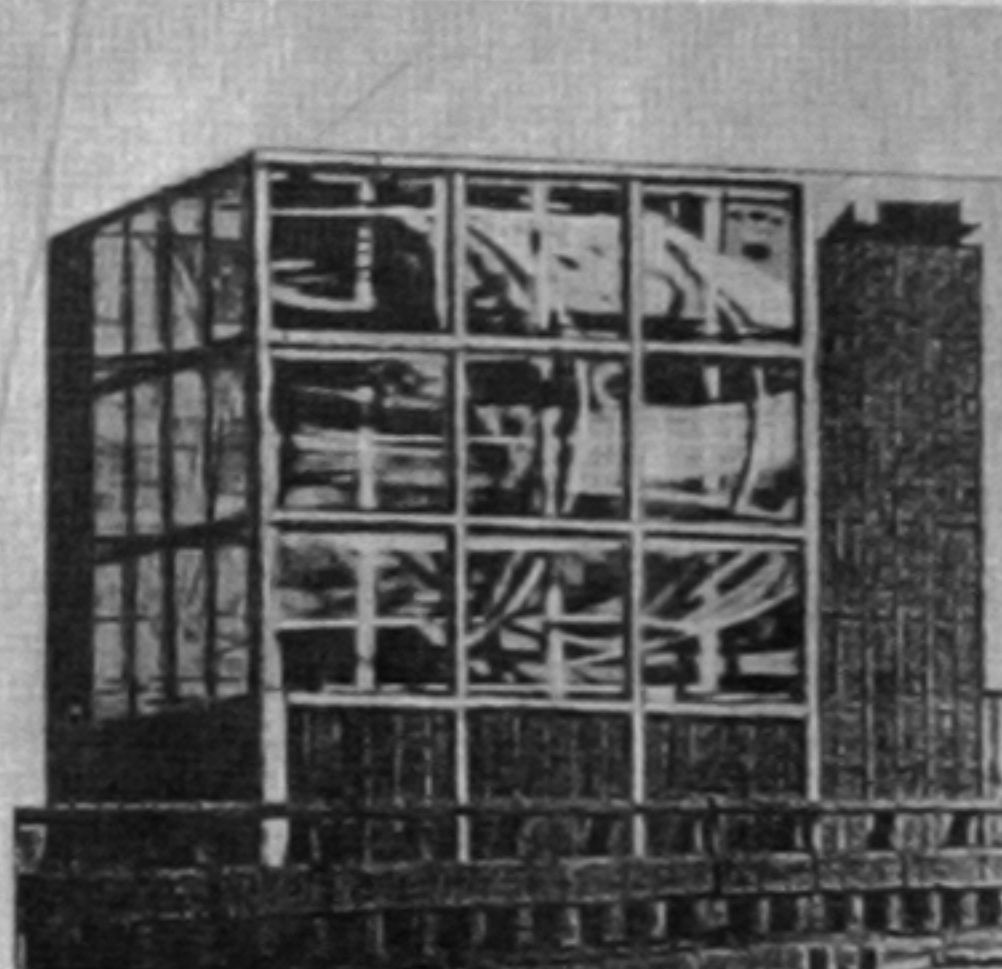
FISHER AND CHRYSLER INTERCHANGE TRANSFORMED  
Brune, Prodi



CAR DEALERSHIP BILLBOARD: DOUGLAS PARKINAST

One of the social events of the working week in Detroit is to go car shopping on Thursday nights. Despite the fact that one rarely buys a car, it is fun to be amidst the lights and the colors and to dream of something new. The lots in the Detroit area are very large, taking up vast amounts of open space along the feeder road to the highways. It was thought that the space could be articulated more effectively if it were divided up into large, outdoor rooms which could provide a more vibrant environment for the selling of the cars. The walls of the rooms could be ornamented with various images reflecting the

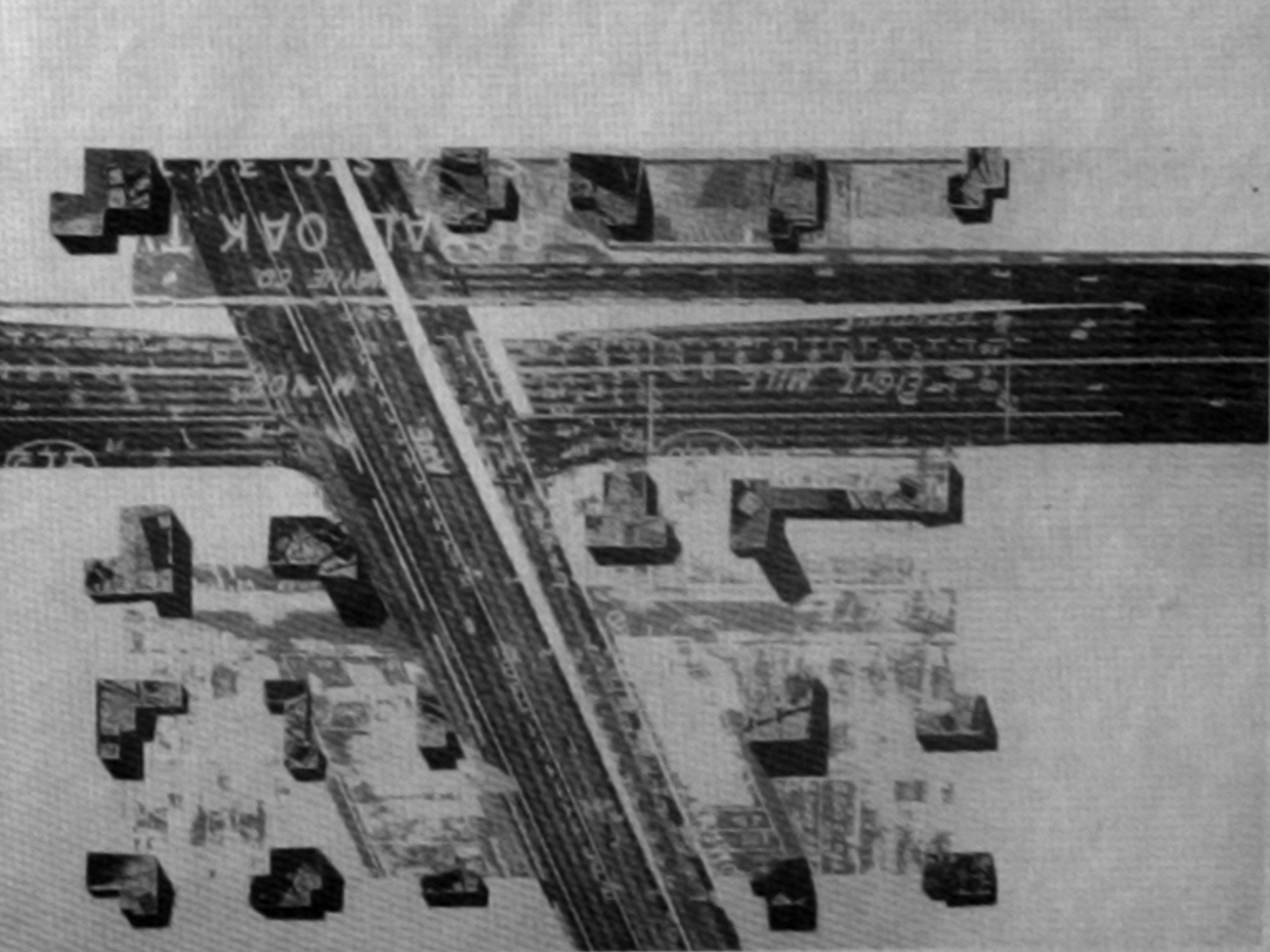
subliminal qualities of the particular style or model of car. In this case the image was constructed from an actual advertisement which was illustrated on the post road it was barely recognizable. In this way the image is mediated so that it can interact with the surface qualities of the wall itself. The point here was to find a medium between image and the material presence of architecture. The presence of the large walls or rooms on the site would also re-establish a volumetric density to the street edge, providing more surfaces for light and color and filling in the pedestrian emptiness produced by the speed of the passing automobile.



OFFICE BUILDING BILLBOARD: MARK LEE

The site chosen for this project is located at the intersection between the Southfield Freeway and Eight Mile Road under a grouping of office buildings built in the late sixties. Many of these built-up areas were only partially occupied and it is unlikely that they will receive any new tenants. The early suburbs of Detroit are now beginning to experience the same economic dislocation seen in the inner city. The proposition is to expose the steel frame on portions of these buildings in order to make space available for a three dimensional, translucent sign. This would reduce the amount of vacant space and provide additional rental income for the owners. The images within the grid are designed to be seen from the broad way of the passing highway, their multi-layered screens creating an anamorphic display that permits a variety of subjects and interpretations. The translucent screens will also project shadows of the image onto the surrounding parking lots so seen on the plan.

Party Store, Detroit, 1994. Camilo Jose Vergara



INHAIBITED BILLBOARDS: KAI, PLUNK

Driving north along Woodward Avenue in Detroit, you know that you are crossing into the suburbs when you pass the two immense billboards flanking the road at the intersection of Eight Mile Road. These are two of the tallest billboards in the Detroit area. The world think that one would be enough but symmetry has its attractions in plans of appearance. Another notable aspect of the billboard is that they lack back towards the city, leaving their steel-framed backs towards the suburbs. It is remarkable how forgettable these rear surfaces are, for though we have passed them many times it is difficult to remember what they look like. Jameson has noted that advertising succeeds in

the extent that it denies the context within which it is placed. The intensity of the advertising image renders its context invisible, dissolving the peripheral structure of the surrounding context into a forgettable blur. This project attempts to re-establish a volumetric clarity for structures along the commercial strip, suggesting advertising images into fragments, upon the surface of simple geometric forms. In this case the wall of the volume are constructed with open board carved black wood whose color are painted various colors. The advertising takes the form of translucent windows cut into the blocks which can be back lit during the evening hours. Again, the attempt is to reestablish a surface upon which the material aspect of architecture can interact with the demands of the commercial image.